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DEPTH OF FIELD

Thomas Struth's way of seeing.

BY JANET MALCOLM

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Thomas Struth's large-scale portrait of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, taken at Windsor Castle, was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in London, for an exhibition of paintings and photographs of the Queen commemorating her Diamond Jubilee, next year. When Struth was approached, he wondered, "Would I be able to say something new about people like this?"

Last April, the German photographer Thomas Struth went to Windsor Castle and took a picture of the Queen of England and the Duke of Edinburgh for the National Portrait Gallery in London. This is not the kind of photography Struth usually does. He is one of today's most advanced and acclaimed art photographers, whose monumental color photographs hang in museums throughout the world, and whose interests do not extend to taking inoffensive pictures of famous people. But when he got the call from the National Portrait Gallery, in January, he found himself saying yes. The occasion was an exhibition of paintings and photographs of Elizabeth II done in the sixty years of her reign, which the Diamond Jubilee of 2012 will celebrate. Struth's photograph would be the final portrait in the exhibition.

"When the National Portrait Gallery called and said that in their eyes I was the best person to do the portrait, I was quite shocked," Struth told me. "My immediate reaction was 'What can I possibly do that's not only affirmative but would include a message from me? Would I be able to say something new about people like this?'"

Struth and I were eating lunch in a Berlin hotel restaurant; it was a month after the sitting, and I had come to Germany to interview him and watch him at work. He is a tall, bearded man of fifty-six with large pale eyes and an exceptionally likable persona. He radiates decency and straightforwardness. He is kind and calm and modest. He is the kid in the class everyone wants to sit next to.

Struth went on to tell me of his elaborate preparations for the portrait of Elizabeth and Philip. He studied old photographs and found most of them wanting. He saw the technical mistakes, "what should not happen"—notably their distracting backgrounds. He visited Buckingham Palace and decided it was too cluttered. When the gilded green, red, and white drawing rooms at Windsor Castle were offered, he selected the green room (the white room was "too tired" and the red room "too much") and spent a day there making test shots. "While I was there, I said, 'I want to see the dresser'—the woman who is in charge of the Queen's wardrobe. Because the second thing I noticed when I looked at the past photographs of the Queen was that many of the dresses she wears are very unfortunate. She has quite big boobs and she often wears something that goes up to the neck and then there is this stretch of fabric under the face that makes it look small." (I smiled to myself at Struth's coarse reference to the royal bosom—a rare lapse in his excellent English.) The day before the sitting, Struth continued, "the dresser came in with twenty dresses. She was a very nice woman, and we had an immediate chemistry. I felt that she saw me. Later, she told the Queen that I was O.K.—that I was a nice guy. I selected the dress, a pale-blue brocade with garlands, a bit shiny, and it matched nicely against the dark green."

I asked if the Queen accepted his choice and he said yes. He did not choose the Duke's costume, except to ask for a white shirt. At the sitting, the Duke wore a dark suit and a blue

tie. “He was perfect,” Struth said.

In further preparation, Struth read a biography of Elizabeth, and “I felt sympathy. They were my parents’ generation. She was exactly my mother’s age and Philip was born in 1921, two years after my father was born.” He added, “I said O.K. to the commission for reasons I cannot name, but I thought, I’m going to have sympathy for these people.”

The paradoxicality of Struth’s association of Elizabeth and Philip with his parents—his mother was in the Hitlerjugend and his father served in the Wehrmacht from 1937 to 1945—could not have been lost on him, and was surely implicit in the “reasons I cannot name.” Like many, if not most, Germans of his generation, Struth has been haunted by the Nazi past, and speaks of the Holocaust as a major influence on his life and work. “If you want to know what formed me,” he said in our first interview, “this is the big thing: the culture of guilt that I was born into and that surrounded me in my childhood.” He told me that he learned about the Holocaust early in his life, though he doesn’t know exactly when—“I feel as if I always knew about it”—and was tormented by the question of his parents’ complicity. His father liked to tell stories about his bad war. He had fought in France and then in Russia, where he was severely wounded twice, and survived “almost as if by a miracle.” These stories “irritated” the young Thomas. “Whenever my father talked about the war, he told only his personal story. He never said something like ‘Oh, my God, when I came out of it and realized what we had done, I felt so sorry!’ That would have been the natural thing to say. But he never said it. I don’t know what he believed.” Struth went on to speak, in a somewhat amorphous way, of his work as a form of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”) by which Germany’s best spirits remain gripped. Will his portrait of the monarch who was on the right side of history (“the last living connection to an episode—the island race standing up to Hitler—that has become the foundation story, almost the creation myth, of modern Britain,” as Jonathan Freedland recently characterized Elizabeth II in *The New York Review of Books*) bring his project of expiation to a remarkable kind of culmination?

If so, it will not be visible in the portrait itself. Struth’s work does not reflect the culture of guilt he speaks of. Unlike, for example, the gritty, dread-inducing paintings of Anselm Kiefer, whose thoughts never seem far from Auschwitz, Struth’s photographs evoke nothing bad. They have a lightness of spirit, you could almost say a sunniness, that is not present in the work of the other major practitioners of the new oversized color photography—Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff among them. Struth is the Sunday child of the lot. His huge photographs—city streets, people looking at paintings in museums, industrial landscapes, factories, laboratories, rain forests, and family groups—are as pleasing as his persona; they seem to be an extension of it. Michael Fried, in his tautly argued book “Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before” (2008), pauses to remark, with apparent

(uncharacteristic) irrelevance—but evident intuitive understanding of the force of Struth’s radiance—“A striking fact about Struth’s public career is the almost universally enthusiastic response that his work has received.” An early enthusiast, Peter Schjeldahl, wrote in the Swiss art journal *Parkett*, in 1997, “It is time to say that Struth’s pictures regularly take my breath away. I find it hard to look at them steadily for any length of time, so intense is their effect on my emotions.” In the catalogue of a 2003 Struth retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Maria Morris Hambourg and Douglas Eklund testified to “a remarkable feeling” they experienced while looking at Struth’s photograph of two women standing before Gustave Caillebotte’s “Paris, Rainy Day,” “of stepping into one’s own skin again, while alienation from others and from history—the curse of the modern—is dissolved in the image.” Today, there is no diminution of the enthusiasm; if anything, it is growing, and sane critics are continuing to lose it under Struth’s mesmerizing spell.

The morning after the lunch in Berlin, Struth and I drove to a factory outside Dresden, operated by a company called SolarWorld, where he would spend the day photographing. He had been there a few weeks earlier to ascertain whether he would find a subject, and he did. We were greeted by an agreeable young woman named Susanne Herrmann, the plant’s public-relations manager, who took us to a changing room where we put on white jumpsuits, white plastic hairnets, and white booties over our shoes so that we would bring no contaminating dust particles into the plant. Dan Hirsch, Struth’s new assistant, who had driven in from Düsseldorf with Struth’s equipment—numerous cameras, tripods, and film—had already arrived. (“I desired somebody like this for a long time,” Struth said of Hirsch, a twenty-eight-year-old Israeli, who had written to Struth and to Candida Höfer a few months earlier, offering his services; he had heard back only from Struth, who interviewed him and hired him on the spot. “Everything he said seemed very honest and made sense.”)

We entered a large room filled with machinery that made a great din and nowhere disclosed the function that its beautiful forms followed. I immediately saw why Struth wanted to photograph here. Everywhere you looked, a fetching ensemble of industrial parts appeared—like a found object—to tempt the eye even as it baffled the mind. While Struth and Hirsch set up a large view camera in front of one of these ready-mades, and took preparatory pictures with a digital camera, I was given a tour of the factory by Ulrike Just, another agreeable employee, with the title of quality manager, and learned what all the activity and complexity was about: inert little tiles, about six inches square, called wafers, were being converted into vital solar panels. The wafers were sent from place to place on the floor to undergo endless chemical alterations, washings, and inspections—all done by machinery. The occasional person we came across on the factory floor was tending to a machine, like a nurse. Watching the machines work was amazing: it seemed as if the merest

of functions required the most violent exercise of machinery. A certain inspection of the wafers, for example, was done by a machine that fairly jumped up and down with excitement. The single human intervention—a final inspection by specially trained eyes and hands—would one day cease; inevitably, machines that could do this work would be invented.

Struth was laboring as mightily as the machines to take his pictures. He had covered his head and shoulders with a gray photographer's cloth, and every shot seemed to cost him great effort. He would emerge from under the cloth looking beaten down and depleted. His assistant did things to assist, but Struth continued to look as if he were undergoing a shattering ordeal. He moved to another place on the factory floor, and the exertions continued. At around two, he reluctantly stopped, and he and Hirsch and I and Susanne Herrmann drove to a restaurant where the founder of SolarWorld, Frank Asbeck, was giving us lunch. A long table in a shady courtyard had been set with nine places. The party was filled out by four executives from the factory, dressed in dark suits, who filed in together and talked only to each other. Lunch was delicious, featuring the white asparagus then in season and being served everywhere in Germany. Asbeck, who was fat and exuberant, more Bacchic than Apollonian, told an amusing story about his previous work, something about being fired before he was hired to run a trout farm because he had written an article about the antibiotics that were being secretly given to the trout. The conversation turned to green subjects, and I quoted Michael Pollan's mantra: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Asbeck laughed and said, "I guess I don't do the not too much part." As he spoke, he patted himself fondly, like one of the large, rich men of the past who took pleasure in their fatness.

After lunch, we returned to the factory and Struth went back to his strenuous labors under the photographer's cloth, with Hirsch hovering nearby, performing his assisting functions when Struth signalled for them. He worked through the afternoon and into the evening hours. The time set for us to drive to Dresden for the night went by, but he showed no signs of quitting. Ulrike Just was staying after hours—she had been told to stay as long as Struth wanted to work. I tried to busy myself by taking pictures with my Instamatic camera. Finally, I rather crossly left for Dresden in a taxi.

Of course, my crossness was unjustified. I had wanted to see a master photographer at work, and had just had the chance to do so. Struth's invisible cloth of obliviousness was as necessary to his art-making as the actual cloth he worked under. To enter the state of absorption in which art is made requires reserves of boorishness that not every exquisitely courteous person can summon but that the true artist unhesitatingly draws on.

The next day, Struth, his courtliness restored, and I walked around Dresden and talked about his project of taking photographs at industrial and scientific workplaces. I asked him if he felt he was making some sort of "statement" about society with these photographs.

“I think yes,” he said, but he added, “Some of the pictures don’t show what I was thinking. For instance, when I went to Cape Canaveral as a tourist I was struck with the sense of the space program as an instrument of power. When, as a state, you demonstrate that you are able to do that, it contributes to cultural dominance. I hadn’t realized this before. But when I went there to photograph I saw that it is something you cannot put into a photograph.”

“Do you feel you need to put large meanings into your work?” I asked.

“Well, it’s part of my thinking. It’s something that stimulates me. To have a narrative is an incentive. If it was only about composition and light and beautiful pictures, I could just photograph flowers.”

“Forget the flowers,” I said. “Let’s stay in the factory. Because there were very beautiful forms there. Wouldn’t that be enough for you? If you just found beautiful compositions there, and made beautiful photographic abstractions. You want to do more than that?”

“Yes.”

“I’m trying to elicit from you what the more is.”

“The more is a desire to melt, like to—how can I say it?—be an antenna for a part of our contemporary life and to give this energy, put that into parts of this narrative of visual, of sort of symbolic visual expression . . .” Struth struggled, and gave up.

I asked him if the fact that SolarWorld’s activity had to do with solar energy was part of his interest in photographing there.

He said that it was, and added, “My own personal energy account is very bad, because I fly so often and drive, and can’t claim that I’m a good sustainable-energy person. But I’ve almost always voted for the Green Party, and since it was founded I always thought these subjects were important and are a fascinating challenge for the world.”

“How will your pictures show that what is being produced at SolarWorld is good for mankind?”

“Just by the title.”

“So photographs don’t speak.”

“The picture itself is powerless to show.”

That afternoon, we flew to Düsseldorf, where Struth has lived and worked for most of his life. He recently moved his living quarters to Berlin, and was about to move his studio there as well. But Düsseldorf has been the center of his artistic life since he entered its Kunstakademie, in 1973, and studied first with the painter Gerhard Richter and then with the photographers Hilla and Bernd Becher. He entered the academy as a student of painting. The paintings he has preserved from this period show a penchant for surrealist creepiness—they depict looming landscapes and sinister people and are painted in a precise, Magritte-like style. After two and a half years, Richter proposed that Struth go and study with the Bechers.

Struth had started photographing as an aid to his painting. He would photograph people on the street, who became the haunted figures in his paintings, as well as the streets themselves, in early-morning de Chirico emptiness. His paintings became more realistic, and cost him more effort, and, as they did so, he had an epiphany. “I realized, this takes too long,” he said over lunch in a Düsseldorf café. “And that I’m not interested in the painting process. I’m interested in making pictures. And if I’m not interested in spending time accurately rendering the shadows in the coat and getting the color of the hat right and stuff like that, I realized—”

“You realized that someone else or, rather, something else—a camera—could do this for you?” I cut in, imagining the eureka moment.

“Yes. After I started taking photographs from which I would make my paintings, I realized that the photograph already does it. The photograph already shows what I want to show. So why make a painting that takes me five months to finish and then it looks like a photograph?”

“That’s what the photo-realists did,” I said.

“Yes, but that’s naïve. I remember when I first saw those paintings, I thought, That’s not very interesting. They are only trying to show they can paint. That’s not art.”

Struth, of course, was mischaracterizing the photo-realist project—which was not to display painterly skills but to cast a cold eye on the psychopathology of mid-twentieth-century American life. The huge paintings of Airstream campers and gooey pies on luncheonette counters brought the details of the color photographs they were based on to an arresting, sometimes almost comical degree of visibility. These paintings were about scale—in much the way that the oversized photographs of Struth, Gursky, Wall, Höfer, et al. are—and in this sense they anticipated the new photography, though they were evidently not a conscious influence on the new photographers.

Recalling his student days, Struth spoke of the atmosphere of seriousness that permeated the academy: “When I came there, it was a shock to realize that I had to regard art as a serious activity and develop a serious artistic practice. Painting and drawing was no longer my hobby, a private activity that I enjoyed. It was something that had categories. Artists were people who took positions and represented certain social and political attitudes. It was an intense experience to realize this. There was very intense judgment by the students—who is doing something interesting and who is an idiot painting lemons as if he were living in the time of Manet and Cézanne.”

In a 1976 student exhibition at the academy, Struth showed forty-nine of the black-and-white photographs he had taken of empty Düsseldorf streets from a frontal perspective leading to a vanishing point, and the success of the series led to a scholarship in New York, where he did the work for which he was first known—black-and-white photographs of

empty New York streets, again taken head on. The assumption that these single-minded works were inspired by the Bechers' über-singleminded photographs of industrial structures turns out to be wrong. As it happens, when Struth took his Düsseldorf pictures, he had not yet seen the Bechers' photographs—another example of the Zeitgeist's uncanny ways.

The Bechers are cult figures, known in the photography world for their “typologies” of water towers, gas tanks, workers' houses, winding towers, and blast furnaces, among other forms of the industrial vernacular. In the late fifties, they began going around Germany, and then around the world, taking the same frontal portrait of each example of the type of structure under study, and arranging the portraits in grids of nine or twelve or fifteen, to bring out the individual variations. They did this for fifty years, never deviating from their austere formula: all the photographs were taken at the same aboveground-level height and under overcast skies (to eliminate shadows), as if they were specimens for a scientific monograph.

Struth is reserved about the Bechers' photographs, though he respects what he sees as the ideological backbone of their enterprise. “When Bernd and Hilla made this contract with themselves in the nineteen-fifties, to catalogue these kind of objects, German photography was all abstract subjectivism,” he said. “People didn't want to look at reality, because what you saw in Germany in the fifties was destruction and the Holocaust. It was all a terrible reality, so precise looking was not a widespread impulse.” The Bechers' precise looking was a model of ethical rigor. But Struth believes that “eventually their meaning in the history of art will be linked more with their teaching and the influence it had than with their work.”

I asked Struth about the influence on him of the Bechers' pedagogy.

“Their big pedagogical influence was that they introduced me and others to the history of photography and to its great figures. They were fantastic teachers, and they were fantastic teachers in the way that they demonstrated the complexity of connections. It was an outstanding thing that when you met with Bernd and Hilla they didn't talk about photography alone. They talked about movies, journalism, literature—stuff that was very comprehensive and complex. For example, a typical thing Bernd would say was ‘You have to understand the Paris photographs of Atget as the visualization of Marcel Proust.’ ”

I said, “I don't get it. What does Atget have to do with Proust?”

“It's a similar time span. What Bernd meant was that when you read Proust that's what the backdrop is. That's the theatre.”

“Did you read Proust while you were studying with the Bechers?”

“No, no. I didn't.”

“Have you read Proust since?”

“No.”

“So what was the point for you of connecting Atget with Proust?”