

DIRECTIONS

THOMAS STRUTH
MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHS

MAY 21 - AUGUST 16, 1992



Kunsthistorisches Museum I, Vienna, 1989. C-print; 704 x 924 in. (179.5 x 234.0 cm).



Fig. 1. *Le Ligorno, Genoa*, 1985. Silver gelatin print; 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (67.0 x 86.0 cm).

THOMAS STRUTH'S MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHS are disarming to the extent that they appear to be candid, casually composed, snap shot-like documents. At first glance they belie the care with which they have been composed, edited, and printed. The fifteen large-scale color photographs in the exhibition, taken between 1989 and 1990 in museums in Paris, London, Vienna, Amsterdam, Chicago, the Vatican, and Florence, have been culled from about 800 negatives.¹ Struth uses available light and a large-format view camera (the type commonly used for architectural photography) mounted on a tripod.² His skillful control of perspective and depth of field contribute to the mood of the photographs and explain the uniform sharp focus and heightened clarity of the pictures. The photographs are laminated to the plexiglass in their frames rather than mounted on backings, which partially accounts for their strange and particular translucency.

Given the photographic apparatus Struth uses, his technique is to set up and then wait for people to walk in and out of the frame. His photographs concern the behavior of people in museums and frame their actions in relationship to those of the figures in the paintings with which they are engaged. Because Struth and his camera are so visible in the process, he assumes the position of observer but not voyeur.

Struth began using photographs when he was a student, first of the painter Gerhard Richter and then of the photographer Bernd Becher, at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, a school where students are encouraged to think of art more as a tool for social knowledge than as a means of self-expression. In order to get beyond his personal fantasies, to become more objective and examine the outside world, Struth first used photographic reproductions from books and magazines as ready-made sources to provide rough ideas for the subject matter of his paintings. Eventually he decided to make his own photographs. He bought a camera and began to follow people "on trams, as part of student life in Düsseldorf, walking in the street."³ After a while he realized that it was hard to extract information from images of "a jacket, a skirt, a couple with a dog." Examining the medium further, he photographed "things which hide things—windows with curtains, bicycles all wrapped up." He finally decided to leave people out of his pictures entirely and began to photograph the streets instead, investigating the possibility that they would reveal more about people than the people themselves.

The black-and-white photographs of streets, which Struth began in the late 1970s in cities in Europe, Japan, and the United States, were his first widely exhibited pictures. Deserted views of both old and



Fig. 2. *Claire Chevrier, Düsseldorf, 1988. Silver gelatin print; 33½ x 26½ in. (85.0 x 67.0 cm).*

modern areas with dramatic vanishing points [fig. 1], they recall the early topographical vistas of Paris by Charles Marville and Eugene Atget, or documentary photographs of the 1930s, or the index-like images of water towers, grain elevators, and blast furnaces of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Struth's photographs capture what is both unique and unexceptional about a specific place. Characterized by an austere formal beauty and a wealth of architectural detail, the street scenes seem, as Ulrich Loock has noted, to "offer an archive of the already constructed world."⁴

The street scenes were followed by a series of equally austere black-and-white portraits [fig. 2] and a series of lush color photographs of couples and family groups begun in 1985 in Japan and Scotland. The group portraits depict interior (private) rather than exterior (public) spaces and were made using the same large-format camera and long exposure as the street and mu-

seum photographs.⁵ The sitters look directly at the camera in poses both casual and formal. Collaborating with the camera, they enact a conscious sense of themselves as photographed images, as if imitating their appearance in family snapshots.⁶ These portrait photographs can thus be thought to constitute as "constructed" a world as that of the city streets.

Struth sees the museum photographs as an extension of this portrait series. As he has said,

The interest in the museum photos came through the portraits, which then led to my occupation with portrait painting, principally with that of the Renaissance.

The trick was . . . to regard portrait painting as I would look at photographs, to understand the original act of portrait painting like this: as an interpretation of the world executed with the means which were common and appropriate at that time. From there arose the idea to bring these two things, with the medium of reproduction, the currently appropriate medium, to the same level; to make a reproduction of a painted image and at the same time to produce a new image in which real persons of today are shown.⁷

Thus the museum pictures function as group portraits in which representation takes place on two levels: the photographed in juxtaposition with the painted image. Acutely aware of the photographic traditions operating in his street scenes and portraits, Struth is interested in what happens to people when they come in contact with an older visual tradition that has also become part of our constructed world.

A quiet intensity pervades some of these photographs, such as *Kunsthistorisches Museum III, Vienna* and *Uffizi I, Florence*. In others, Struth has captured surprising affinities between the way people situate themselves in space and the formal composition of the paintings: the circular group sitting on the floor beneath the oval Tiepolo painting in *Louvre II, Paris*, for example, and the emphasis on verticals in both the viewers of and figures in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* in *Art Institute I, Chicago* or the diagonal line-up in front of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* in *Louvre IV, Paris*.

We have become accustomed to reproductions and replicas, images of images. In juxtaposing the fixed time of the paintings with that of the viewers, Struth's museum photographs have the unexpected effect of returning to the paintings a sense of "aura," the term

used by the philosopher Walter Benjamin to describe the sense of special authority or authenticity that we ascribe to original and unique works of art.⁸ Struth makes us aware of the idiosyncratic groupings and restless animation on the part of the viewers, who display what Donald Kuspit has called a "resistant vitality" in the face of institutionalized imagery.⁹ Struth has said,

What I wanted to achieve with this series . . . is to make a statement about the original process of representing people leading to my act of making a new picture, which is in a certain way a very similar mechanism: the viewer of the works seen in the photo is an instance which finds itself in a space to which I, too, belong when I stand in front of the photo. The photos illuminate the connection and should lead the viewers away from regarding the works as mere fetish-objects and initiate their own understanding or intervention in historical relationships. . . . Therein lies a moment of pause or questioning. Because the viewers are reflected in their activity, they have to wonder what they themselves are doing at that moment.¹⁰

The generic and the specific operate simultaneously in Struth's museum photographs, portraits, and street scenes. As in traditional documentary photography, Struth's titles identify his subjects by name (street and city, family and city, museum and city), but exactly what these names are meant to tell us is not clear. Instead, the captions make us aware of the subjects as both distinctive and commonplace, for they are not architectural landmarks or famous people, and in the museum series neither well-known works of art nor artists are identified.

Struth's subjects (the city street, the portrait, the work of art as a self-referential object in the isolated context of the museum) are the familiar subjects of modernist art. Through his pictures, Struth asks us to consider to what extent we form our images by what we see—both in the kinds of spaces we construct and inhabit and by the images we have and continue to create of ourselves. In the museum photographs we see ourselves looking over someone's shoulder, as it were, to see how we have depicted ourselves in the past.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator

The artist supplied the reproduction photographs used for this brochure.

1. Because all Struth's photographic series are open-ended, more images from the museum series may eventually appear.

2. "The photos are made with a 13 x 18 cm (5 x 7 in.) negative . . . or with a 4 x 5 in. negative and a Planibel camera, with Schneider or Rodenstock lenses. . . . Aperture was mostly 5.6 or 8 to 11, shutter speed mostly 1 second or 1/6. Light is often low in museums, unfortunately." Thomas Struth, letter to the author, 14 November 1991. My thanks to Lee Stalworth, Steve Szabo, and Wendy Vail for helping clarify some of the technical details of Struth's photographic procedure.

3. This and all unattributed quotes are from a conversation with the artist, 20 September 1991.

4. Ulrich Loock, "Thomas Struth," *Crustace Camera* 5 (May 1988): 14.

5. For information about Struth's choice of camera in his street scenes and portraits, see Ulrich Loock, "Photographien aus der Metropole/Photos of the Metropolis," in *Thomas Struth: Unbekannte Orte/Unconscious Places* (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1987), p. 73; Isabelle Graw, "Ein Interview von Isabelle Graw mit Thomas Struth," *Artis* (December 1985): 37; and "Interview between Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Thomas Struth," in *Portrait: Thomas Struth* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1990), p. 30.

6. "When I make a portrait of a family, I intervene at the moment when these persons have most often been photographed." Struth, in "Interview between Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Thomas Struth," p. 36. The formal, frontal views and direct stares of the sitters also recall August Sander's portraits of German citizens personifying their professions.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

8. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217-51. The essay was first published in German in 1936.

9. Donald Kuspit, "Thomas Struth," *Artforum* 29 (December 1990): 133.

10. Struth, in "Interview between Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Thomas Struth," pp. 39-40.



Fig. 3. Musée d'Orsay II, Paris, 1989. C-print, 88 1/4 x 72 in. (224.0 x 183.0 cm).

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Geldern, Germany, October 11, 1954. Studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, 1973-1980. International Studio Residency, P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York, 1978. Lives and works in Düsseldorf.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1985 Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich, *Thomas Struth*.
- 1987 Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne, *Thomas Struth: Kunsthalle, Bern, Thomas Struth: Unbewusste Orte/Unconscious Places*, and tour; Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art, Yamaguchi, Japan, *Thomas Struth*.
- 1988 Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich, *Thomas Struth: Neapel und Tokyo*; Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne, *Thomas Struth: Neue Bilder*.
- 1989 Halle Sud, Geneva, *Thomas Struth: Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna, Thomas Struth*.
- 1990 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, *Thomas Struth: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Portraits: Thomas Struth*.
- 1991 Gallery Shimada, Yamaguchi, Japan, *Thomas Struth*.
- 1992 Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne, *Thomas Struth: Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Thomas Struth: Portraits*.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1981 Wiener Secession, Vienna, *Erweiterte Fotografie, Extended Photography*.
- 1987 Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, *Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987*.
- 1988 Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, *Another Objectivity*, and tour; Centre Cultural de la Fundació Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, *La Red Revisada*.
- 1989 Massimo Audiello Gallery, New York, *Deconstructing Architecture/Reconstructing History*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, *Photo-Kunst*.
- 1990 Venice Biennale, Aperto 90; Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, *German Photography*.
- 1991 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, *Currents*; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, *Typologies: Nine Contemporary Photographers*, and tour; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, *Aus der Distanz*; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *A Dialogue about Recent*

American and European Photography: The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Carnegie International 1991.

- 1992 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, *Photography in Contemporary German Art: 1960 to the Present*, and tour.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Denson, G. Roger. "Thomas Struth: Marion Goodman Gallery." *Contemporanea* 23 (December 1990): 95.
- Graw, Isabelle. "Düsseldorfer Künstler (III): Orakunde: Ein Interview von Isabelle Graw mit Thomas Struth." *Artis* 41 (December 1989): 36-40.
- Haggood, Susan. "Thomas Struth at Marian Goodman." *Art in America* 79 (January 1991): 133-34.
- Hixson, Kathryn. "Thomas Struth: Hoping to Transcend the Photograph's Representational Function." *Flash Art* 153 (Summer 1990): 140.
- Kuspi, Donald. "Thomas Struth." *Artforum* 29 (December 1990): 132-33.
- Loock, Ulrich. "Thomas Struth." *Creative Camera* 5 (May 1988): 14-19.
- Portraits: Thomas Struth*. Exhibition catalog. New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1990. Interview by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh.
- Schwabsky, Barry. "Thomas Struth." *Arts Magazine* 65 (December 1990): 83.
- Thomas Struth*. Exhibition catalog. Geneva: Halle Sud, 1989. Essay by Jean-Francois Chevrier.
- Thomas Struth*. Exhibition catalog. Yamaguchi, Japan: Gallery Shimada, 1991. Essay by Kyoshi Okutsu.
- Thomas Struth: Photographs*. Exhibition catalog. Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1990. Essay by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh.
- Thomas Struth: Unbewusste Orte*. Exhibition catalog. Yamaguchi, Japan: Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art, 1987. Essay by Mikio Takata.
- Thomas Struth: Unbewusste Orte/Unconscious Places*. Exhibition catalog. Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1987. Essays by Ulrich Loock, Ingo Harfmann, Friedrich Meschede.

CHECKLIST

Dimensions, including frame, are given in inches (and centimeters), height precedes width. All photographs are in editions of ten.

Kunsthistorisches Museum I, Vienna, 1989. C-print; 70% x 92% (179.5 x 234.0) Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Kunsthistorisches Museum II, Vienna, 1989. C-print; 60% x 78% (154.0 x 200.0) Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Kunsthistorisches Museum III, Vienna, 1989. C-print; 57% x 73% (145.0 x 187.0) Collection Chase Manhattan Bank, N. A.

Louvre I, Paris, 1989. C-print; 72 x 92% (183.0 x 234.0). Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne.

Louvre II, Paris, 1989. C-print; 86 x 70% (218.5 x 180.0). Nicholas A. Polsky, New York.

Louvre III, Paris, 1989. C-print; 59% x 66% (152.0 x 168.0). Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne.

Louvre IV, Paris, 1989. C-print; 72% x 85% (184.0 x 217.0). V. Mahdavi and B. Nešal-Ginard, Boston.

Musée d'Orsay I, Paris, 1989. C-print; 57% x 72 (147.0 x 182.9) Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Musée d'Orsay II, Paris, 1989. C-print; 88% x 72 (224.0 x 183.0). Collection Powell, Goldstein, Frazer & Murphy, Washington, DC, and Atlanta.

National Gallery I, London, 1989. C-print; 70% x 77% (180.3 x 196.2). The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida.

Uffizi I, Florence, 1989. C-print; 70 x 83% (178.0 x 213.0). The Art Institute of Chicago, Solomon B. Smith Endowment.

Art Institute I, Chicago, 1990. C-print; 68% x 81% (174.0 x 206.0). Lothar Schirmer, Munich.

Art Institute II, Chicago, 1990. C-print; 72% x 86% (184.0 x 219.0). The Art Institute of Chicago, restricted gift of Lewis Manlow.

Musei Vaticani (Pinacoteca), Vatican, 1990. C-print; 66% x 81% (168.0 x 206.0) Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne.

Rijksmuseum I, Amsterdam, 1990. C-print; 64% x 83% (164.0 x 212.0) Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne.



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