

#36 January 2019 Cameraderie
Thomas Struth (1954-present)



Thomas Struth is a current photographer and professor of photography. His work constantly re-examines how we see and relate to art and our environments.

Here is the Wikipedia article on Struth:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Struth

And here is a short quote from that article:

By including in his photographs people who are looking at art, "Struth makes viewers ... aware of their own active participation in the completion of the work's meaning, not as passive consumers but as re-interpreters of the past." [Quoted from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) catalog of his show there in 2003.]

Here is Struth's website, where you can browse through his projects on cityscapes, viewing art, family portraits, and some of his other major projects:

<http://thomasstruth32.com/ipad/index.html>

I became interested in Struth when The New Yorker published a major article on his work. Please have a look at it. It goes far deeper into Struth's work than I can do here.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/09/26/depth-of-field>

Here are some samples of his projects.

Art Institute of Chicago I Chicago 1990 Audience I Florence 2004



Here are two stages of Struth's major project on visitors to art museums. First, in his Chicago image, he shows, as in the MOMA quote above, that art requires viewers to complete it. But then he goes one step further, and removes the art itself from the image, and only studies the viewers in Florence, suggesting that when viewing art, the viewers are the *only* subjects.

Crosby Street New York 1978



Like my own fascination with architectural scenes, Struth has a keen interest in showing urban scenes devoid of people. He has done this extensively throughout his career. I am not sure of his purpose, but I am pretty sure it goes beyond simple formal composition. I think it must contain an invitation for the viewer to see and look at their environment separately from how they see it when they are in it. Does Struth ask "How can one live here?" or "What have humans wrought?" as if it were possible to think about it and choose? Here is what *The New Yorker* Article says about Struth's street scenes:

In a 1976 student exhibition ..., 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.



Remember last month, when we saw a portrait of this same couple by Yusuf Karsh? I asked you to make a mental note of the sofa in the background. Well, this is not the same sofa, but here is the portrait of the royal couple on a similar sofa half a century later. As Karsh did, Struth balances the positions of the couple so that the more important figure, the Queen, is foremost—more fully lit, closer to the camera, with lighter shades of dress and hair. What else has Struth done? The more I look at this image, the more I think I see. How about the fingers of their hands? His are open, I think suggesting uncertainty; hers are closed, suggesting decisiveness. By his own account in *The New Yorker* article, Struth has chosen to simplify the surroundings—compare to Karsh’s image last month.

Like the portrait of the Queen and Duke, which is printed larger than six by eight feet, Struth has photographed the world of architecture and industry in enormous finished images. The *New Yorker* article reports of these:

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. ... Every detail ... is rendered in razor-sharpness, as are the clothes and knapsacks of the dwarfed tourists in ... front 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.

I find in Struth’s work consistent and complete attention to seeing people and things and the world and their inter-relationships. He never seeks to make an image “pop” with color or contrast. I don’t think he does any significant post-processing. In this respect, I find him

challenging almost everything that is so popular in photography today, and perhaps suggesting that is not what photography is about.