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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?"

ast 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.

LHe 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

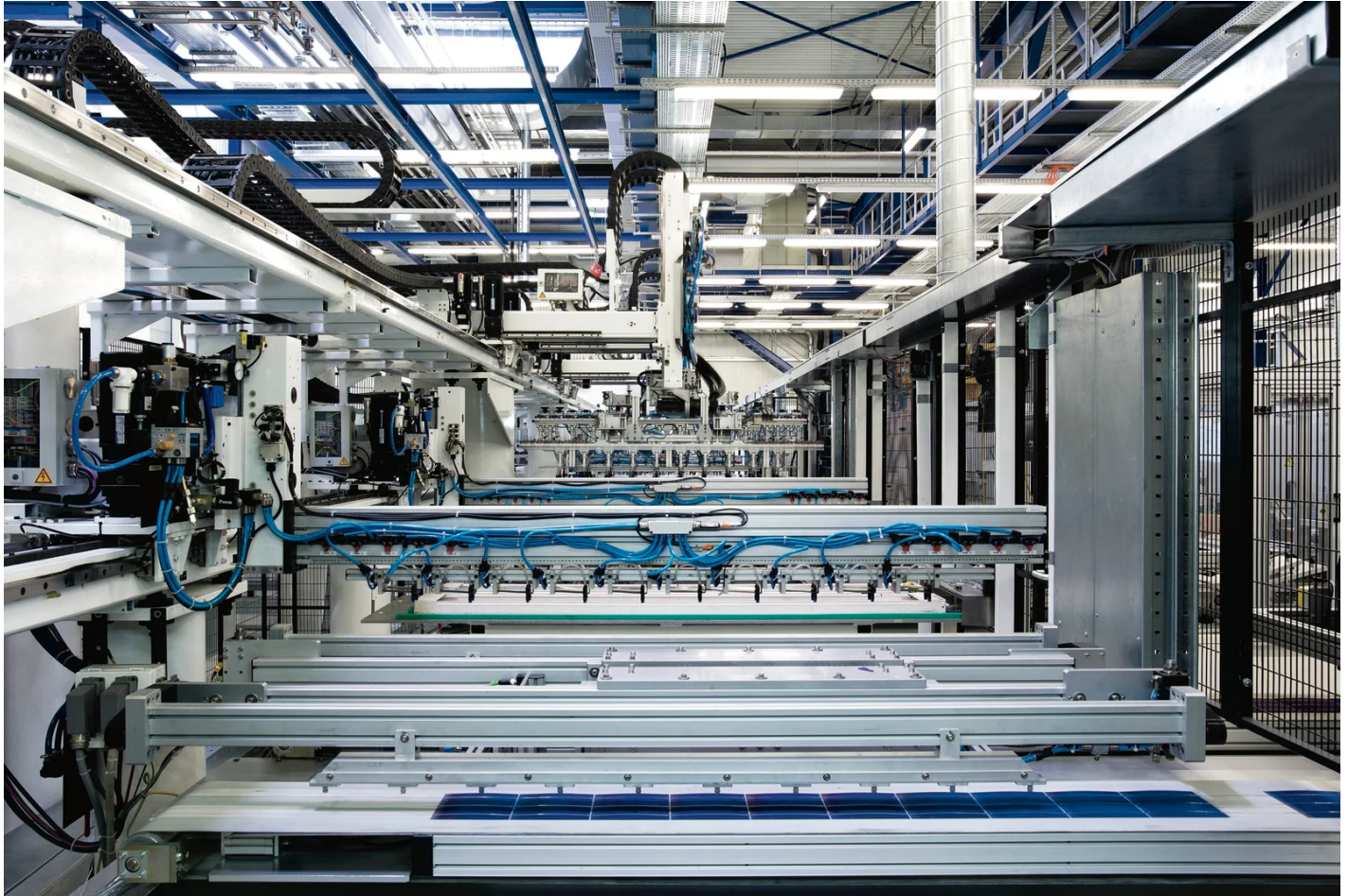
the question of his parents' complicity. His father liked to tell stories about his bad war. He had fought in France and then in Russia, where he was severely wounded twice, and survived "almost as if by a miracle." These stories "irritated" the young Thomas. "Whenever my father talked about the war, 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.



“String Handling, SolarWorld, Freiberg 2011.” The SolarWorld factory outside Dresden makes solar panels.

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?”

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.”



“Galleria dell’Accademia I” (1992) shows museum visitors standing in front of Veronese’s “Feast in the House of Levi.”

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 spareness 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.



Struth, photographed by the author, at the Grieger printing lab, in front of a test strip of his portrait of the royal couple.

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

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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.” ♦

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