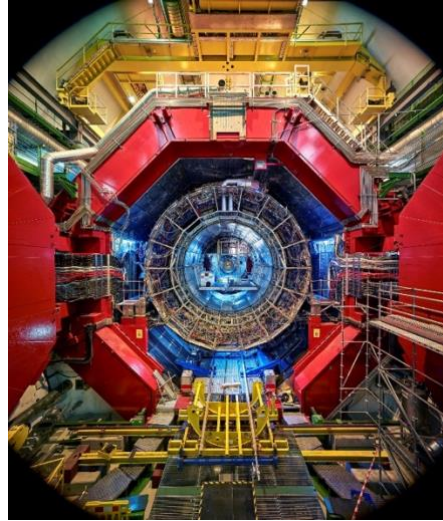


**BROOKLYN RAIL**

*Thomas Struth*

by James Welling (April 2022)



Thomas Struth, *ALICE, CERN, Saint Genis-Pouilly 2019*, 2019. inkjet print, 106 3/8 x 90 1/2 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Thomas Struth.

Technology, human presence, and the seasons are the subjects of Thomas Struth’s new inkjet prints currently on view at Marian Goodman Gallery. Struth was born in Germany in 1954 and studied at the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf. After graduating, Struth and classmates Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff, and Andreas Gursky launched a new form of photography that prized clear, carefully composed images. The work at Goodman continues to demonstrate Struth’s passion for this kind of thoughtful, observational photography.

The photographs in the north gallery were made at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, in Western Switzerland. Photography has long served the instrumental ends of science, and Struth may have been drawn to CERN because the sophisticated detectors housed there derive genealogically from photography. In Struth’s photographs CERN is a mysterious, cluttered, kaleidoscopic space. We see workspaces chock full of contingent and modular arrangements of equipment alongside casual disorder, all absent the physicists in charge. Some of the rooms resemble gigantic circuit boards, with tangles of wires and cables connecting everything to everything.

*Cosmic Ray Test Area, ATLAS, CERN, Meyrin 2019* (2019) shows a blue, grid-like enclosure oriented parallel to the camera. A bundle of cables connect with a small purple “wave runner” display unit that stands ready to monitor cosmic rays. Six other displays are scattered on other surfaces. Like this enclosure, the structures at CERN are painted in industrial “safety colors”: blue, yellow, orange, red, and green. Struth modulates these colors to gently deepen their saturation. All the surfaces and edges of things depicted in the photographs have an uncanny, eagle-eyed clarity that signals the fact that post-production tools were used to increase sharpness.



Thomas Struth, *Schlichter Weg, Feldberger Seenlandschaft 2021*, 2021. Inkjet print, 85 1/4 x 177 1/8 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Thomas Struth.

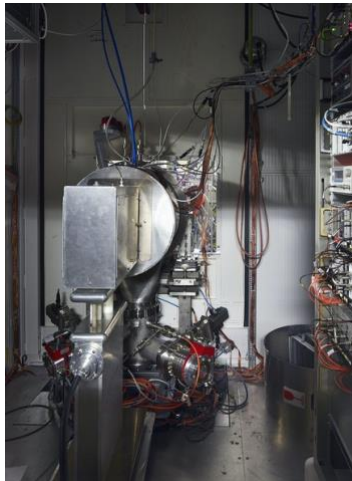
*ALICE, CERN, Saint-Genis Pouilly 2019* (2019) is a huge photograph depicting a cadmium red, multistory octagonal detector. Beyond the colossal grandeur of ALICE (“A Large Ion Collider Experiment”), what interests me in this photograph is the subtle vignetting at the four corners of the print. Vignetting occurs when the film plan is smaller than the image circle that the lens produces. ALICE was too large for Struth’s optics to “cover,” and the edges of the photograph have darkened where the light “falls off.” Rather than compositing an image from multiple exposures to correct this deficiency, Struth accepted the view as is. Occasionally photographers make use of lens vignetting—Emmet Gowin and Jeff Wall come to mind—but the chance of finding a vignettted view today is as rare as coming upon a four-leaf clover.



Thomas Struth, *Cosmic Ray Test Area, ATLAS, CERN, Meyrin 2019*, 2019. Inkjet print, 70 1/8 x 122 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Thomas Struth.

While the horizontal CERN photographs suggest tangled landscapes, two small detection devices read as humanoid robots. *Ion Source, PSB, CERN, Meyrin 2019* (2019), fabricated in shiny metal, looks like the younger cousin of the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*. Across the room, another vaguely anthropomorphic machine, *Retired Detector, OPAL, CERN, Meyrin 2019* (2019), sits, out to pasture, in a damp Swiss ravine. This giant silver oculus, fashioned from radiating rods and cables, rests next to a grove of birch trees near dingy red and blue trash containers. It’s chilling to think that all the gear Struth photographed at CERN will be supplanted in the future by as yet unimaginable technology.

A group of “Family Portraits” occupy a small conference room in the middle of the gallery. I first saw Struth’s portrait work in the 1992 documenta where he photographed his friends casually arranged in a spacious room. Later, Struth photographed family ensembles by directing them to assemble naturally and gaze into his camera lens. I read the serious composure in Struth’s family portraits in the tradition of Greek family stele from the classical period. On these carved tombstones, members of a family stood and mingled with calm dignity, and Struth’s four families similarly sit or stand at ease in domestic spaces. It appears each person has exhaled right before the shutter was tripped. The walls are the color of light putty, and this warm green-gray is reiterated in the frame color. The optical and emotional openness of the portraits owes something to Struth’s lighting: each session is illuminated by natural light that floods in from a nearby window and defines the faces of Struth’s subjects beautifully.



Thomas Struth, *Ion Source, PSB, CERN, Meyrin 2019*, 2019. Inkjet print, 47 x 34 7/8 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Thomas Struth.

As I studied at the portraits, I imagined the show through a series of musical metaphors. The CERN images are symphonic in scale. The portraits suggest duets, trios, or quintets played by family members. To continue the analogy, the somber winter landscapes in the south gallery suggest a medium-size chamber orchestra. The magisterial *Schlichter Weg, Feldberger Seenlandschaft* (2021) commands the back wall of the south gallery. *Schlichter Weg* is over fourteen feet long and depicts a row of bushes and brambles at the edge of a road. Snow seems to have fallen the day before and dislodged from some of the branches. You feel quiet and profound stillness in the blank, white sky. Two other landscapes on adjacent walls depict similar, humble, meditative winter scenes. The prints are framed without glass and this allows the viewer to see the subtle mossy greens and yellowish browns on the bark and in the wrack.

The subjects Struth photographs represent vastly different scales of time. Infinitesimal durations are measured by the CERN detectors. In the portraits, time is as long as a human life. And in the winter landscapes duration is one of endless seasonal rotation. One final image, a photographic non sequitur, concludes the show and suggests a fourth temporality. *Ellsworth Schist, Rockport, Maine 2021* (2021) is a vertical photograph that depicts summer foliage surrounding a twisted outcrop of rock. The photograph is hard to read. Struth told me he made it on his cell phone, converted the file to a black-and-white negative, and printed it analog. The undulating schist reminds me of an image produced by a flow or strip camera, used in photo-finishes or by a flatbed scanner. The wavy schist is a flow exposure, a scan, millions of years long.