

# Thomas Struth: Photographs 1978–2010

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Over the past three decades, **Thomas Struth** (b. 1954) has established an international reputation as one of the leading contemporary artists working in photography. Picturing subjects as diverse as empty city streets, crowded museums, places of worship and sites of advanced industry the different bodies of his work relate to each other like an extended family, gradually evolving over time. However, all are underpinned by the same rigorous formal approach to the medium.

Struth belongs to a generation of pioneering photographers who in the late 1970s emerged from the Masterclass led by Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Academy of Fine Arts, Düsseldorf. His work recently was the subject of a major travelling retrospective in the U.S., that included the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2002. From 1993–1996 he was the first Professor of Photography at the newly founded Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe. He is currently the first Visiting Professor in Fine Arts at Oxford University and was recently commissioned to photograph The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh. Struth lives and works in Berlin and New York.

This is Struth's first major exhibition in the UK for twenty years. To find out more about the artist and his work you can view a film of rare footage showing Struth in his studio and on location, screening in the Zilkha Auditorium at the rear of Gallery 1. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue available at £29.95. An original limited edition photograph is available to buy for £395 at the Information Desk.

The photographs in this exhibition are directly mounted onto transparent perspex. Perspex and frame are integral parts of the artwork and cannot be replaced separately. Therefore, please do not touch.

*Thomas Struth: Photographs 1978–2010* is organised by Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf and Kunsthaus Zürich in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery. The exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery is curated by James Lingwood with Achim Borchardt-Hume, Chief Curator and Cassandra Needham, Assistant Curator.

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Struth's *Museum Photographs* reflect on the different functions of art in an increasingly secular society. Focusing on the moment of contact between iconic works of art and their audiences, Struth's images vividly capture the faith that people collectively invest in cultural achievements of the past. The majority of these images are unstaged with *Pantheon*, 1990 being a rare exception.

Whilst working on the *Museum Photographs* Struth occasionally speculated on the possibility of reversing the vantage point of spectator and work of art: 'I sometimes wished I could be the painting looking at the faces of the audience.' This is the perspective he adopted in his series *Audience*, realised in 2004 over the course of one week at Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia, when he repeatedly photographed visitors awe-struck by Michelangelo's sculpture of *David*.

Rooted in the *Museum Photographs*, a number of works made in places of worship further questions the dynamic between systems of faith and representation. The even focus in *San Zaccaria*, for example, puts the figures of the Madonna and Saints in Giovanni Bellini's altarpiece on a par with church-goers and culture-hungry tourists.

A new body of photographs depicting sites at the cutting edge of technology continues Struth's fascination with complex visual structures and humankind's constant striving to imagine and to realise ever more ambitious projects. At the same time, the panoramic close-up of the space shuttle undergoing repair work and the vast photograph of an oil rig under construction in Korea, one of Struth's largest images to date, query the collision between science, politics and power.

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Cities have been an enduring preoccupation for Struth since the mid-1970s, from photographs of empty streets to panoramic views of the sprawling 21st century metropolis.

Whilst studying at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts Struth decided systematically to document the ordinary streets of a reconstructed German city. The strong central perspective which gives the images an extraordinary sense of depth creates a unifying formal framework for the series. Subsequently, Struth adopted a similar approach to photograph the depopulated streets of other European cities including Rome, Naples, London and Edinburgh, as well as Manhattan, New York and Tokyo. Over the past decade, Struth has continued to revisit the theme of the city widening both its geographic remit as well as its formal scope, switching from black and white to colour photography and adopting more varied perspectives.

The *Paradise* series is conceived as an installation with several works surrounding the viewer. The first images were taken in the tropical rainforest in the northeast of Australia with subsequent locations including Brazil, Peru, Hawaii and Florida. With their dense screens of vegetation void of any sign of human interference, the *Paradise* pictures are markedly different from Struth's usual focus on culture and place a heightened emphasis on the experience of looking. As Struth himself has commented: 'Although they have a strong feeling of time, they are a historical. There is nothing to discover, no story to be told. They have more to do with the self.'

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Since the mid-1980s, Struth has made an extended series of *Family Portraits* in different cultures around the world.

Similar to the photographs made in historic sites they demonstrate Struth's continuing interest in the way in which his work relates to popular types of photography such as travel or family snapshots.

Each *Family Portrait* is made within a similar set of rules. The portraits are not made to commission, instead the initial invitation comes from the artist. Struth and the family then decide together on the location of the photograph in their home or garden. Like the visitors in the *Museum Photographs*, the members of each family organise and pose themselves rather than being arranged by Struth. The only stipulation from the artist is that they look straight into the camera.

The *Family Portraits* relate to Struth's extensive travels with the sitters largely drawn from a network of friends and working associations. The formal similarities between the portraits of families from different cultural backgrounds therefore reveal a certain sense of commonality amongst otherwise very different people. Struth himself has observed that 'when you look at family photographs you understand through the traces something of what was going on, of the social structure of the time. The traces of structures, social and psychological, are legible'.

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